

FINDINGS: Serious limitations on the freedom of religion or belief continue to occur in Turkey. Turkey's active civil society, media, and political parties influence the climate for religious freedom and help define the debate about the appropriate role of religion in society. Turkey has a democratic government, and the country's constitution calls for the protection of the freedom of belief and worship and the private dissemination of religious ideas. Nonetheless, the Turkish government's attempt to control religion and its effort to exclude religion from the public sphere based on its interpretation of secularism result in serious religious freedom violations for many of the country's citizens, including members of majority and, especially, minority religious communities. The European Union (EU) continues to find that, despite some improvements since its 2001 bid to join the EU, "Turkey needs to make additional efforts to create an environment conducive to full respect for freedom of religion in practice." An additional factor influencing the climate during the past year includes the alleged involvement of state and military officials in the Ergenekon plot, which included alleged plans to assassinate the Greek Orthodox and Armenian Orthodox patriarchs and to bomb mosques.

Due to these concerns, USCIRF continues to place Turkey on its Watch List in 2010.* Turkey was first placed on the USCIRF Watch List in 2009.

State secularism in Turkey continues to depend on full government control over all religions, and has resulted in significant restrictions on religious freedom, including for the majority Sunni Muslim community, the minority Alevis (usually viewed as a unique sect of Islam), as well as Christian and other minority communities, such as the Greek, Armenian, and Syriac Orthodox Churches and others. Only Sunni Islam is officially permitted, and the state controls all official mosques, training of Muslim clergy and the content of sermons. Despite Turkey's obligations under the 1923 Lausanne Treaty, the government legally has not recognized minority religious communities as independent entities with full legal status, such as the Ecumenical Patriarchate of the Greek Orthodox Church. The resulting restrictions on religious minority communities, including state policies and actions that effectively deny non-Muslim communities the right to own and maintain property, train religious clergy, obtain and renew visas for religious personnel working for these communities, and offer religious education, have led to the decline—and in some cases the virtual disappearance—of these communities.

The Turkish government, in recent years, has responded quickly to arrest those suspected of violent hate crimes against members of religious minorities, such as individuals believed to be involved in several high profile murders of Christians. However, the resulting trials, like all Turkish trials, are protracted. The ruling party has instituted legal reforms aimed at preventing

military involvement in civilian politics and providing a greater role for religion in public life; a constitutional reform package was before the parliament in March 2010. Anti-Semitism remains a problem in the media and public discourse, due in some measure to statements and gestures of the Prime Minister that have been reported publicly.

PRIORITY RECOMMENDATIONS: The United States regards Turkey as an important strategic partner, especially in light of its NATO membership, shared borders with Iraq and Iran, and emerging leadership role in the Middle East and Central Asia. The United States also continues to support Turkey's bid to join the European Union. U.S. policy should place greater emphasis on Turkey's compliance with its international commitments regarding freedom of religion or belief. For instance, the United States should encourage the Turkish government to address the long-standing lack of full legal recognition for religious minorities, including Alevis; Greek, Armenian, and Georgian Orthodox; Roman and Syriac Catholics; Protestants; and Jews. As President Obama noted in his April 2009 address to the Turkish parliament, the United States should continue to urge Turkey to permit all religious minorities to train religious clergy in Turkey, including by reopening the Greek Orthodox Theological Seminary of Halki. The United States also should work with Turkish authorities to allow women the freedom to express their religious or non-religious views through dress in order to respect both their beliefs and the secular status of the Turkish republic, as well as to remove legal restrictions on the wearing of clerical garb by non-Muslims in public. Additional recommendations for U.S. policy towards Turkey can be found in the 2010 Annual Report chapter on Turkey.